

THE ROLE OF YOUTH IN SOCIETY

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Introduction

The youth as defined by the United Nations refers to the population sector with ages ranging from 7 to 24 years old. It is estimated that at least 50% of the world population belongs to the children and youth category. The youth category is fundamental basically because it constitutes not only the fathers and mothers of tomorrow but perhaps more importantly, the nation's future leaders as well. According to UNESCO, "the position of young people everywhere, despite different social backgrounds and national cultures, has certain similarities". (UNESCO, 1977). Youth in any society have an important role to play, the more so if their country happens to be a young developing nation, such as Zimbabwe. "Youth in Zimbabwe represent a very significant and vital part of the nations human resources" (V. Brand et al, 1980) and it is little wonder that the government in this country has "embarked on a programme to establish a network of youth centres throughout the country"(Kasambira, 1987).

Youth Problems

According to a UNESCO, 1978 document, there are many complex problems confronting young people today. The role of the youth in society, in my view, can best be understood in the context of these various problems facing the youth. The problems can be viewed in the context of operating structures (eg economic, political, social and cultural), and their interrelationships with each other. In order to put the discussion in its proper perspective therefore, it is necessary to commence by providing a brief overview of some of the major problems faced by the youth in society today.

The majority of the psychologically-related problems faced by the youth revolve around the period of adolescence. As we might all be aware, growing up is a gradual process involving physical, intellectual, emotional and social spheres.

Development in these various spheres does not always occur smoothly. As a CAFS (1981) document put it, the sudden developmental changes are often accompanied by tremendous emotional problems. This is probably why you might find an adolescent may be happy at a particular moment and within seconds their mood may change leaving them confused and often unhappy. The impact of the changes is seen in the adolescent's thinking, feeling, reactions and generally in the way he/she does the things he/she does.

In a general sense, the socio-economic problems faced by young people include youth unemployment, poverty, juvenile delinquency, drug abuse and health and nutrition problems. But at a more subtle level particularly with those in school, the main problems in this regard revolve around financial issues basically. The dilemma here is with regard to sources of income for pocket money, 'going out' expenses and clothing - to name but a few. Among today's young generation, there seems to be a kind of infinite competition going on among the youth themselves and it seems no one can enter this competition without money. Time does not permit an exhaustive exploration of all these aspects, suffice it to say that clothing appears to be quite a topical issue^u and allow me to expand on it a little.

In adolescence, clothes become extremely important in making the adolescent feel comfortable. Girls especially feel so strongly about clothes that they will prefer to leave school as soon as they can rather than wear school uniform, which they believe accentuates and sometimes exaggerates their physical disadvantages. The fact that adolescents feel unsure about their physical appearance often causes them to spend a considerable amount of time in front of the mirror in order to alter their body image. Girls experiment with make-up and hair-styles and worry about their figure. If for instance their breasts have not developed they feel childish and conspicuous, yet when they do develop, they worry about them becoming too big. Very often, they worry about weight increase and usually they will take up to slimming diet some ending up with a condition called anorexia nervosa. Boys take some time to get used to their new voice when it becomes broken. The boys might become anxious about the growth of their beard.

For the adolescents, the peer group is extremely important because it is within its context that they formulate and revise the way they perceive themselves. The adolescent tends to be more loyal to this group than even to his/her family group and this often creates crisis situations. The peer group is therefore quite powerful in the determination of the adolescent's personality and life style.

A further source of youth problems is the sexual feelings that have to be dealt with in adolescence. These feelings are difficult to suppress and are therefore often a source of conflict: On the one hand, the adolescent is sexually mature and able to produce children and therefore strong bodily urges arise, but on the other hand adolescents are not able to take on the burden of family life at this stage. Fortunately our society discourages marriage or a free expression and fulfilment of sexual feelings until much later. In any event, this gives rise to problems of guilt and shame among the youth, especially if this stage is not correctly handled.

Cultural problems are those that have to do with healthy development or distortions of attitudes, values and ideologies of the youth through various cultural outlets like education institutions, religions, mass media, political and civic organizations. The so called "generation gap" is also often a major source of conflict. According to UNESCO (1977) "many governments were noticing that the rejection of the established social order was not only a silent reaction by socially marginal or under-privileged young people but was also becoming a common attitude even among more privileged classes of youth.." (p30).

Political problems are those that are related to meaningful involvement and active participation of the youth in decision-making processes on matters that affect their own welfare.

Many other problems of the youth can be identified and discussed but time and space do not permit. ~~Suffice it to say these other problems include drug abuse, alcoholism, juvenile delinquency, baby dumping, etc.~~ From the many problems highlighted so far in this discussion, it is clear that the youth question is a complex issue which calls for a nation's undivided attention.

It is now opportune, in the light of the problems highlighted, to try and identify and examine the role of youth in society.

The Role of the Youth

The youth have a role to play in the social, cultural, economic and political spheres of a nation's development. Let us look at each sphere in turn and try and examine what role the youth are expected to play in each sphere.

a) Social Sphere

The UNESCO (1977) document on youth lamented that "governments were becoming increasingly concerned about certain types of behaviour among young people and particularly about the possible implication for the future if the young could no longer accept the values of their parents"(p30). There is indeed conflict between today's youth and their parents and this 'antagonism' has been attributed to what is referred to as the 'generation gap'. A critical scrutiny of the problems appears to show that its source is linked with the rapid development of intelligence that takes place among the youth. This is not the full explanation, but the youth who is conscious of his intellectual superiority may become aware of the occasional faulty judgement of his elders. He realizes that his knowledge and power of reasoning are equal if not superior to his parents' and he becomes aware that parents, although he had thought of them as 'always right', can make mistakes. The adolescent is of course still childish to believe that if parents are wrong in one thing, they must be always wrong; that if he himself is right in one thing, he is always right. The judgement of absolute self confidence in his own judgement is sometimes irritating to older people. They may feel that their children are beyond their control. This sort of conflict is of course unhealthy for both sides and it is important that the youth should seek an accommodation with their elders in this regard.

b) Cultural Sphere

The cultural element is also very important. The youth should view themselves as the conscience of the nation and hence the custodians of the nation's culture. If they do not take measures to not only preserve but promote their nation's culture, then they risk ending up with a nation without a cultural identity of its own. No nation could proudly call itself a nation if it had no culture of its own. The notion that exists among many of our youth that "that which comes from the West is best" should not only be discarded but should also be condemned with the contempt it so richly deserves. There is need to declare a war of attrition on this negative and retrogressive attitude held by some young people.

Our youth should be wary of the so called "youth culture" as represented by such groups as the Punks, the Hippies and the Skin-heads. Sociologists argue that youth cultures are "supposed to express feelings of youth which are different from those of adults" (UNESCO, 1977, p59). In my opinion, the motive behind many of these movements is simply to destroy a nation's treasured and established culture. The point is if these groups had complaints to make, there are better channels than free love, smoking ganja etc. In making these pronouncements, I do not wish to be misconstrued as conservative or dogmatic. On the contrary, I would like to think I am quite progressive and pragmatic in approach. I do not regard borrowing from other cultures as being a sin of either commission or omission, in itself, as long as it is done with foresight and a presence of mind. There is need to be selective in our choice of aspects to be borrowed from other cultures. While the incorporation of certain aspects from other cultures enriches one's own culture, it is also capable of adulterating one's culture to the point of destroying the very fabric on which it is built. Therefore there is need to tread softly. Otherwise the most important point to bear in mind is that youth have an obligation to not only preserve but promote their nation's culture. This can be achieved through theatre, publications, music etc. In other words I would urge our youth to write short stories, novels, poems and musical lyrics that promote our culture.

On no account should a patriotic young person disown his own culture as being inferior. On the same token if you label other people's culture as inferior then you are guilty of ethnocentrism.

The youth should also endeavour to excell in other aspects of cultural life such as competitive sport, and they should feel proud when selected to represent not only their respective institutions but their country as well, be it in soccer, tennis, rugby, squash, swimming, boxing, chess.....you name it. They should regard the national flag with due respect and should feel proud to hoist it at international youth gatherings such as scout jamborees, athletics and other sport meetings.

c) Economic Sphere

On the economic front, the youth should be seen to consciously participate in production. In industry, in commerce, in the civil service, on farms and other workplaces, the youth should try and fight for the improvement of conditions of service through a concerted thrust against exploitation and oppression. They should also be seen in the forefront in the battle against unemployment. According to a study commissioned by the Ministry of Youth Sport and Culture in 1985, in Zimbabwe, the present indications are that "each year at least 80 000 additional jobs must be made available to provide employment for fresh job seekers who are entering the job market". The economic situation is such that it is virtually impossible to absorb a significant fraction of this figure in the formal sector. What this means is youth have to take the initiative and dream up income generating projects such as cooperative ventures to alleviate the unemployment problem.

In the event of compulsory national service being instituted, this should be embraced with enthusiasm and should be viewed as a national duty. Community services project organizations such as 'Interact' must be encouraged since they cultivate in the youth, a spirit of selflessness.

The youth must be clear at the outset what contribution they hope to offer to the nation. They should then fight to acquire the necessary skills to accomplish their dream. Careers Guidance service plays an important role in this regard. If the youth happen to get an opportunity to do further studies abroad, for instance, they should be careful what fields they specialize in. Needless to say the fields have to be relevant to their nation's manpower needs. For example I do not see much sense in someone proceeding to embark in a career in Nuclear Physics if his/her country is not a nuclear country and hence will not benefit from these skills. Those youth sent to study abroad owe it to their nation to return after completion of their studies. Brain drain has been one of the major headaches facing developing countries in particular. Time spent at college should be spent wisely and fruitfully.

d) Political Sphere

Getting involved in politics at an early age in life enables the youth to appreciate the problems faced by their country. However, the youth should refrain from overzealous activities lest they get "swallowed up" by politics at the neglect of other various areas of personal development including education and training. Getting involved in politics also helps youth to cultivate a sense of vigilance against enemies of the state. In a multi-ethnic society like Zimbabwe, the youth should help promote reconciliation by shunning tribalism, nepotism, regionalism and racialism. One way to discourage tribalism is by encouraging marriage across tribal lines.

The youth should also be clear in their own minds what ideological route they are pursuing, because if they are not, then they might find it difficult to identify their allies from their enemies. It is incumbent upon the youth to support, defend and strengthen the ideals that the nation stands for, wherever they are, what ever they do. The youth must not be found wanting when it comes to defence of the country.

They must be prepared to serve in the army, in the air force (eg as pilots), in the prison service and indeed in the police force. If need be, they should be prepared to pay the ultimate price (ie death) for their country, in order to defend the nation's democracy and sovereignty. They should also be prepared to join other youth organizations capable of preparing them for future roles as leaders and citizens of the country.

Conclusion

Zimbabwe youth must be wary of those who try to lure them to engage in anti-social behaviour such as drug abuse, alcoholism, drunkenness truancy and other delinquent idiosyncracies. There is need for the youth to maintain a high degree of integrity, honesty and respect. Young people should be responsible and should refrain from thuggery and showing off of their physical power by terrorising the very people they are supposed to be defending. They must aim to build for themselves an impeccable self-image that should act as a foundation for their future roles in society. They should be public spirited and be prepared to put the nation first and be hungry to serve the nation.

From the above discussion, it is evident that the youth have a tremendous role to play in the social, cultural, economic and political spheres of a nation's life. Life is about challenges and sacrifices and hence the youth should not be found wanting in this regard. It is however not quite enough to simply call upon the youth to engage in the various activities mentioned in this paper, without asking for societal support in general, as well. Society should provide the youth, not only with the necessary guidance and support, but with the wherewithall (ie the tools) with which to achieve these various goals. Society thus has an equally valuable part to play in preparing the youth for their future roles and the process should be multi-faceted. As the UNESCO (1977) document argued, "The mobilisation and education of youth should be achieved together with the preservation of traditional cultural values, behaviour and attitudes"(p 26). Having said that, I should however reiterate that the ultimate responsibility with regard to playing a useful role in society does lie with the youth themselves.

It is up to them to stand up and be counted. It is up to the youth to heed the call and say in the tone of a biblical verse, "Here we are society send us". The catch phrase as far as the youth vis a vis their role in national development should perhaps be, "Ask not what your country can do for you, but rather what you can do for your country".

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